

**Telling Stories: Narrating Violence in the Contemporary French *Banlieues*
(1992-2006)**

*This article contributes to contemporary debates on violence and literature, suggesting that representations of the banlieues are increasingly challenged by the emergence of new writing practices. Such developments are linked in part to a current reconceptualisation of literature, and can be associated with the growing recognition of the banlieues themselves as a literary space in which innovations in writing practices can bring to light the presence of 'amateur' writers in the literary sphere. This article focusses on a series of suburban texts identified during an ethnographic study of La Courneuve's much maligned council estate known as the Cité des Quatre Mille: Khaled Amara's poetic short story 'Couleurs de la vie' (1992), Thérèse Bernis's récit *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* (1997) and Maurice Bernard's short story 'Le Drame était prévu' (2006). This article suggests that the analysis of these published and unpublished texts can help to deconstruct the violence that reduces the banlieues to a mere space of orality. Additionally and more importantly, it unveils the literary response of 'ordinary' writers in the face of complex and inter-related forms of violence, physical and symbolic, pervading French society today: (neo)-colonial, state, economic, domestic, amongst others.*

*Cet article contribue aux débats contemporains sur la violence et la littérature, et suggère que les représentations des banlieues ont été de plus en plus contestées par l'émergence de nouvelles pratiques d'écriture. Ces développements relèvent d'une reconceptualisation de la littérature et peuvent être associés à la reconnaissance grandissante des banlieues en tant qu'espace littéraire au sein duquel les innovations concernant les pratiques d'écriture mettent en lumière la présence d'écrivains 'amateurs' au sein de la sphère littéraire. Cet article se concentre sur une série de textes de banlieue glanés lors d'une étude ethnographique de la tristement célèbre Cité des Quatre Mille à La Courneuve: la nouvelle poétique de Khaled Amara, 'Couleurs de la vie' (1992), le récit de Thérèse Bernis, *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* (1997) et la nouvelle de Maurice Bernard 'Le Drame était prévu' (2006). Cet article suggère que l'analyse de ces textes publiés et non publiés peut aider à déconstruire la violence réduisant les banlieues à un simple espace d'oralité. Plus important encore, il dévoile également la réponse d'écrivains 'ordinaires' face aux formes complexes et connexes de violence, physique et symbolique, qui irriguent la société française contemporaine: néo-coloniale, étatique, économique, domestique, entre autres.*

The French *banlieues* have long been depicted in cultural productions as the epicentre of violence and disorder. However, in a postindustrial and postcolonial France, the image of the *banlieues* as a locus of violence has emerged in ever more complex and problematic ways. New forms of dramatic and violent representations have swept through French popular culture from the 1990s onwards, particularly when it comes to cinema (Tarr 2005) and literature (Horvath 2015). As Mucchielli (2011) and others have shown, the 1960s portrayals of the *cités rouges* (working-class suburbs) as places of petty crime, gangs and murders not only started to create a sense of profound 'moral panic' but also questioned the integrity and stability of the nation. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the construction of immigrants as a 'problem' for the security of the nation constituted a platform for the development of the 'discours sécuritaire' (see Rigouste 2009). After 9/11, the escalation of the journalistic and

political rhetoric compounded the fear of the *banlieues*, while a series of terrorist attacks (2012 and 2015) and violent riots (2005, 2007 and 2010) epitomised the crisis of an increasingly fragmented French society. Ten years on from the riots which rocked the French establishment, this article revisits a hitherto neglected area of cultural production¹ by analysing testimonies and unpublished literature from those who may be termed ‘auteurs en marge’ with the aim of allowing a more nuanced understanding of violence, both physical and symbolic, within and without the *banlieues*. For the purposes of the present discussion, I draw on the work of Michel Wieviorka (1999), to define violence in a broader, more encompassing way which extends beyond commonly accepted forms of physical violence (assaults, domestic and sexual violence, criminal behaviour, riots and terrorism). Here, I argue that there are other kinds of violence: economic, political, social (Lordon 2002, Balibar 2007, Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2014 respectively) carrying consequences which are equally deleterious as physical acts. This violence manifests itself through ‘le modèle néolibéral de la concurrence’ (Lordon 2002, 42), ‘la propagande sécuritaire’ (Balibar 2006, 56) or ‘la casse sociale’ (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2014, 9). As Wieviorka has stated, in any case, ‘la frontière entre les deux registres [physique et symbolique] n’est pas évidente’ (1999, 16) and this is why I propose to extend the treatment of violence in this way in relation to my corpus.

The power of literature to explore politics and social realities means that it can counter new discourses on violence circulated by journalists, politicians and other commentators which present the *banlieues* as a lawless territory overwhelmed by acts of physical violence. In the aftermath of the 2005 riots, the political commitment of writers and intellectuals such as the Qui fait la France? collective² is but one example of a renewed vigorous protest, and stems from the dramatic increase in more insidious forms of violence, taking on increasingly ‘symbolic’ characteristics. This violence emanating from a symbolic order, ‘qui agit en la faveur des dominants’, has served as a pivotal instrument of oppression against the ‘dominés’ (Bourdieu 2000, 238). Although texts like those by the Qui fait la France? collective are clearly significant, this article aims to focus instead on previously under-explored narratives, which expose telling accounts penned by ‘ordinary’ inhabitants of the *banlieues* in the face of violence in French society: Khaled Amara’s ‘Couleur de la vie’ (1992), Thérèse Bernis’s *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* (1997) and Maurice Bernard’s ‘Le Drame était prévu’ (2006). Using unconventional modes of writing, these narratives also raise intricate and intriguing questions of authorship, power and voice.

The three works under consideration illustrate different ways of approaching writing, including narratives which emerge from creative writing workshops, accounts which are produced in collaboration with others and texts which are self-authored. Firstly, the short story ‘Couleurs de la vie’ was written by student Khaled Amara during a creative writing workshop held in La Courneuve in 1990. Forming part of the collection of texts in *Sang gris* (1992), it focusses on the subjective experience of a young graffiti artist in the face of urban exclusion and racial discrimination. Secondly, Thérèse Bernis’s *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* (1997) was composed in collaboration with a writer possessing prior publishing experience, Catherine Vigor. The story deals with the memories of migration, exile and racism as encountered by a Caribbean woman cleaner. The final text under discussion, ‘Le

Drame était prévu' (2006), comprises an unpublished short story by Maurice Bernard, a retired manual worker and 'amateur' journalist. It concentrates on the tragic death of a young man from the Cité, thereby exposing the legacy of colonialism and ravages of economic liberalism.

By comparing and contrasting the dominant discourses on *banlieues* and violence, and the writings conceived in the Cité des Quatre Mille, it can be seen how, over the last two decades, testimonies by *les gens ordinaires* have played a significant part in the construction of alternative narratives of violence both physical and symbolic, as Pierre Bourdieu's *La Misère du monde* (1993) compilation of transcribed interviews with residents in socially deprived areas shows. As Bourdieu explained, '[n]otre méthode a été de se mettre à la place de celui qui parle et d'essayer de voir le monde à partir de son point de vue' (cited in Maggiori and Marongiu 1993). Also based on empirical research, this article aims to underline the importance of alternative narratives of the *banlieues* whilst focussing on 'amateur' writers who live in the Cité and practise writing in their daily lives. The texts in question articulate experiences of violence as part of *banlieues* life between the 1960s and 2000s, and reveal the importance of the intersectionality of class, gender and race as they each foreground the impact of violence on descendants of immigrants, immigrant women and the working-class and the complex interweaving of these factors in the representations of the *banlieues*. In each of these cases, the texts deal with varied forms of violence reminding us again of the perpetual interconnection between the physical and the symbolic realms as Wieviorka affirms: 'La violence symbolique et la violence plus concrète [...] s'alimentent et s'interpénètrent, ce qui interdit de se contenter de les distinguer. Il s'agit bien plutôt de se contenter de les penser simultanément' (1999, 17).

A further common denominator of the three texts selected here is that they concentrate on the representations of a notoriously violent multiethnic suburb: La Courneuve's Quatre Mille, which has often been compared by journalists, politicians and experts to a 'no go area' (Wacquant 2006, 158). Affected by profound social and economic problems, the infamous Quatre Mille, which derives its name from the number of flats built between 1962-1970, is situated a mere seven miles to the north east of Paris, yet is far removed from the capital's centres of political, economic and cultural power. Indeed, over the years La Courneuve has witnessed incidents of physical violence of different degrees (muggings, assassinations, riots and terrorism). Furthermore, it is generally considered in France and beyond to have contributed in part to the 2005 riots when, during the course of a visit to the Cité, former Ministre de l'Intérieur Nicolas Sarkozy controversially advocated the use of 'Kärcher' (pressure washer) to clean up the 'racaille' (scum), remarks which remain engraved in the memory of those who reside in the *banlieues* and elsewhere. Balibar sees Sarkozy's inflammatory language as part of a wider establishment discourse:

La stratégie «Sarkozy», qui s'est prolongée depuis sur le terrain de la lutte contre «l'immigration clandestine», est surtout passée dans les mémoires à travers les déclarations «intempestives» du ministre d'Etat: insultes généralisantes et appels répétés aux sentiments racistes des «petits blancs». Elle aussi contribue à amplifier la violence pour mieux s'attribuer le mérite de la maîtriser, mais avec un autre accent: celui du «réalisme» voire de la «responsabilité» (2007, 58)

The 2005 riots which began in reaction to the death of two young men pursued by the police also highlight that, in contrast with the discourse denounced by Balibar, these two young adults were victims rather than agents of violence. While the stigmatised and disadvantaged *banlieues* have been classified as a troubling and disordered space, they have also been labelled culturally as primarily a place where ‘oralité’ reigns, perpetuating the periphery as a place of ‘non-écriture’ or ‘sous-écriture’ (Mori 2012, 70). Local writers in their work provide a fresh outlook on the realities and myths that permeate the rhetoric on *banlieues* violence and this is certainly the case for Amara, Bernis and Bernard whose writings deal with their lives in La Courneuve. Their telling stories have not only fought against certain stereotypes of the *banlieues*,³ but have also fostered ‘other’ ways of narrating French society, allowing for new methods of conceiving violence in contemporary French writings.

Expanding the *Banlieues* Literary Canon: Testimonies of Violence in La Courneuve

Representing the *banlieues* in popular literature and culture is by no means a new phenomenon and there is in fact a long-standing, important tradition of *banlieues* novels (Hargreaves 2013) especially crime fiction (Dubois 1988). From the 1930s to the 1950s, these locations served as the backdrop for much fiction, including novels by Marcel Aymé and René Fallet who transposed in fiction the preexisting suburban tensions notably amongst European immigrant workers. French writers and descendants of France’s ex-colonies born in France have long made the *banlieues* their own, using the novel form to outline the living conditions and hardships of the people who live there. Critics in French literature and postcolonial studies (Laronde 1993, Thomas 2011, Horvath 2015) have since highlighted the importance of ethnic minority literary productions in relation to the city margins, analysing texts such as Medhi Charef’s *Le Thé au harem d’Archy Ahmed* (1984), Rachid Djaidani’s *Boumkoeur* (1999), Faïza Guène’s *Kiffe kiffe demain* (2004), Mohamed Razane’s *Dit violent* (2006) and Insa Sané’s *Daddy est mort... Retour à Sarcelles* (2010). These works have made manifest the physical and symbolic violence confronted by the *banlieues* and the ‘postcolonial’ subject. Simultaneously, the study of such texts has given rise to a well-known repertoire, forming a contemporary *banlieues* literary canon, one that has now attained national and international recognition. By focussing on a small corpus of writings, including but not limited to the texts listed above, French critics have established a solid, if somewhat restrictive, basis for the analysis of literary representations of the *banlieues*. Although neglected by recent research, written texts in the form of short stories and poetry, which in fact form a significant part of *banlieues* culture, have also been overlooked by sociologists. Interviewed in *Le Monde* (27 October 2006) sociologist Marc Hatzfeld declared:

Il y a peu de littérature issue des banlieues. Les gens qui habitent les banlieues aujourd'hui sont des gens [... qui,] il y a deux ou trois générations, ignoraient pour la plupart largement l'écrit. En revanche, ces populations jouissaient de la richesse de cultures orales extrêmement élaborées. Et on trouve cette richesse dans une oralité vigoureuse, inventive, transgressive, qui apparaît à la fois

dans le slam et dans les conversations quotidiennes des jeunes et des moins jeunes

If Hatzfeld’s analysis confirms what Mori (2012, 70) calls ‘the grand partage oral/écrit’, we may draw instead upon Claude Fossé Poliak’s concept of ‘amateur’ writing, which analyses the complexity of ‘écriture ordinaire’ and ‘écriture littéraire’, observing that:

le tracé des frontières entre écrits ordinaires et littéraires n’est pas simple. Tous soulignent des glissements possibles [...] Si tous les écrits ordinaires se distinguent de l’écriture noble, certains peuvent en être les prémisses ou être pratiqués avec une intention esthétique et être destinés à des lecteurs inconnus. Ils peuvent accompagner des écritures plus littéraires ou y prédisposer (2006, 230)

Moving away from traditional literary criticism and sociological views, the ordinary writings of those living in the *banlieues* can be said to possess a therapeutic dimension (Fossé Poliak 2006, 104-5) in the face of physical and symbolic violence. Based on the autodidacticism and atypical cultural training of their authors, these texts displaying resilience constitute a simple but important literary commitment. These ‘amateur’ texts can be seen as part of a developing ‘phénomène de masse’ (Albert 1993, 222) in French society and, as such, can help us move beyond canonical *banlieues* texts and re-interpret violence in contemporary French writings.

‘Couleurs de la vie’: Escape as an Art Form

Since the 2005 riots, writing workshops have played a significant role in French suburbs as a way to deal with and limit violence (see Mori 2012).⁴ Featuring as part of the collection of short stories, *Sang gris* (1992), an early example of a workshop initiative, ‘Couleurs de la vie’ not only illustrates the writing capabilities of young people from the *banlieues*, but also shows how the young residents blend image and text to deconstruct the trivialisation of violent representations of the periphery (Mucchielli 2011, 24). Born in 1974 and raised in the Quatre Mille, Amara was then a *lycéen de banlieue* who had always lived on the estate. Presented as a typical final year student, eaten away by the frustration and rage at suburban life, Amara is also a talented graffiti artist who has the reputation of being ‘le “grapheur” des paliers et escaliers, chambres des copains’ (Bon 1992, 128). At seventeen pages long, ‘Couleurs de la vie’ is a poetic short story produced within the confines of a weekly *atelier d’écriture* which took place throughout a three month period in 1990.

These workshops aim to foster the exploration of language and so allow the participants to experiment and try their hand at writing. The sessions are structured by certain set parameters which play a major part in the writing experience such as the establishment of a mini-library (Bon 1992, 130), literary discussions with Bon and the French teacher, Anne Portugal, at the Lycée Jacques Brel (ibid., 130) and the creation of a transcription which is given to each participant after each weekly session (ibid., 129). Although there are evidently issues relating to power and politics at stake during the sessions, Bon nevertheless states that the ‘seule méthode de l’atelier d’écriture a été de chercher avec chacun individuellement la voix qui pourrait lui être

propre, et de l'accompagner en essayant à chaque fois de rejouer plus avant cette singularité' (ibid., 127). Prompts such as the 'banlieue paillasson' by Louis-Ferdinand Céline (ibid., 134) and 'franchissement fantastique' by Franz Kafka (ibid., 130), and the use of the well-known literary lines, Georges Pérec's 'Je me souviens' (ibid., 133) and Arthur Rimbaud's 'On n'est pas sérieux quand on a dix-sept ans' (ibid., 134), represent an axis for Amara's writing process. However, the most telling trait of his writing is the fact that although he uses these cues, he goes further by creating his own poetic passages, fuelled by his passion for graffiti. Heavily influenced by graffiti techniques, the text is defined as an 'art graphique de banlieue' (Amara 1992, 17) and so constitutes an original artistic representation of the disqualified space of the *banlieues*, often labelled by security experts as 'quartiers de non-droit' and 'de sécession' (Raufer and Bauer 2000, 27).

Physical violence is central to Amara's short story and his narrative incorporates much of the lexis to be found in the language commonly used by the media, ranging from terms such as 'jeunes des cités' (Amara 1992, 22) to the 'casseurs' and 'la délinquance' (ibid.), thus confirming Amara's awareness of the 'terme médiatique: "Violence dans les banlieues"' (ibid., 20). While some of the *banlieues* residents 'cassent C & A' [...] ils cassent surtout la banalité de leurs journées' (ibid., 22) as the author puts it, Amara embarks on his writing project to defuse such violence and reflect instead on its many layers. Building on innovative literary representations of the *banlieues* such as those described by Charef, Amara highlights poverty, exclusion and marginalisation, which deeply affect the local community and the youths in particular. He thus represents the Quatre Mille with its 'barres de béton de quatorze étages' (ibid., 19); as a 'réserve', 'pour parquer les pauvres', 'un monde vide' (ibid., 21), 'oublié' (ibid.), 'ignoré' (ibid.), where 'rêves' (ibid., 18) and 'ambition' (ibid., 19) are often prohibited. Amara's prose appears sharp, fluid and precise, breaking from stereotypical linguistic assumptions (*verlan*, vulgarity, syntactical irregularities) associated with the 'Français contemporain des cités' (Goudailler 1997). Besides challenging the *alphabétisation* of the descendants of immigrants, the mastery of spelling also calls assumptions about the *langue des jeunes* into question. As noted by Bon (1992, 129), '[c]ontre certains préjugés, l'orthographe ne nécessite pas qu'on la leur adapte: Khaled Amara, qui ne se relit pas, n'a jamais fait une seule "faute"'.

Yet, more than Amara's command of the French language, what catches the reader's eye in this short story is certainly the use of different size fonts, capitalisation, italicisation and blank spaces which make his writing reminiscent of what I term 'graf/ures', a neologism referring to a prose style inspired by graffiti techniques. Graffiti can be defined as the act of drawing on the walls for the purpose of communicating a message; using his pen to jot down words on paper in the same way a graffiti artist would use her/his spray can to form colourful shapes, the short story deals with the 'désastre urbanistique de La Courneuve' as Bon puts it (1992, 125). Just as in graffiti art, Amara's lines provide the reader with an original representation of the Quatre Mille's infamous architecture through colours, fonts and typography, while positioning Amara as the author of this arresting tableau of a high-rise staircase:

Une cage d'escalier, c'est un cube, alors des cubes et encore des cubes
jamais de la même couleur [...] Tu vois des cubes sur le plafond qui
débordent des murs latéraux. Et à l'opposé du plafond, le sol, avec à

l'opposé des cubes de cercles entremêlés dans des vagues et des voiles pour le sol. En face de toi, trois autres murs et un mur blanc. Le mur est indispensable. Derrière toi, un lettrage de KHALED qui ondule et t'attaque violemment. C'est fini, alors regarde! (Amara 1992, 20-21)

The portrayal of the Cité in a *langue soignée* produced in an *atelier d'écriture* is a characteristic of Amara's writing but through his use of graffiti techniques, his work goes beyond conventional forms often used in traditional modes of *banlieues* writings. The references to colours to reflect on issues of colonisation, urbanisation and racism engage the reader with the issue of the individual rights in a multiracial, multicultural France, as exemplified by the following excerpt:

Le blanc est là aussi au milieu de l'Afrique et des autres, n'est plus ni maître, ni traître, il est juste habitant des Quatre Mille avant la pluie, les nuages sont blancs. Quant au gris, c'est la banlieue qui le veut. La cité, la nôtre est unique car elle est blanche, bleue et grise. Le gris du trottoir en deux couleurs de gris. Plus de couleurs, juste des races qui s'amassent et se tassent (Amara 1992, 21)

In this way, this original text demonstrates how a young resident of La Courneuve deconstructs violence through writing and masters notions that Mori associates with writing: 'réflexivité', 'normes maîtrisées' and 'élaboration conceptuelle', and not orality: 'spontanéité' and sometimes 'brutalité' (2012 70). Amara's text also shows how the young people of the *banlieues* whose image is often reduced to one of *casseurs* can think creatively on issues of race, ethnicity, inclusion and exclusion. The painful feelings of captivity and banishment clearly transpire from the narration of Amara's lived experience. However, this depiction does not mean that any escape attempt is bound to failure. On the contrary, Amara's tale is also evocative of hope and success, even if this will mean that he has to leave La Courneuve. In keeping with the spirit of Stéphane Beaud's work (2004) on the slow but effective assimilation of the young population of the *banlieues*, Amara's ultimate message certainly conveys the idea of a potential liberation: 'Je me suis échappé de là mais ni par la fenêtre, ni par le rêve [...] mais seulement par moi-même, mon activité et ma vivacité' (Amara 1992, 19). While the problems of young people are foregrounded in this tale, the issue of gender is less conspicuous as Amara's Cité remains ultimately a fundamentally male dominated space. Yet through the relationship with his mother, Amara becomes aware of the particular challenges faced by the women of La Courneuve. Interspersed among the numerous details suggestive of the inhumanity and brutality experienced by his father and brothers, Amara's mother's life reads as filled with the sufferings and distress caused by the division of space and the fear of violence towards her children. Even if those challenges are touched upon fleetingly in his short story, they clearly sketch the painful and singular condition of Maghrebi women living in the *banlieues*:

Mon père, lui rentrait, il faisait nuit; mes frères n'étaient pas encore là, parfois au poste, mais sinon je rentrais parce que ma mère s'inquiétait de cette ville si peu accueillante. Mon père rentrait très fatigué, il ne fallait pas faire de bruit, les conséquences étaient mauvaises pour nous et même si on n'a pas pu faire comme les autres, aller au parc avec nos parents, on y allait avec les mecs de la cité, nos frères, et pourtant même si parfois on a pu pleurer à cause de lui et que je l'ai détesté, il s'est crevé pour nous. Pendant que ma mère était là chez

nous, et détestait cette ville de La Courneuve, banlieue Nord de Paris, lui était mort de fatigue à force de travailler dans ce putain de boulot de chauffeur livreur (ibid., 26)

These anxieties around discrimination and cultural dislocation as experienced by immigrant women from the *banlieues* will be developed by Thérèse Bernis, although in different forms.

Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe: Migration, Work and Identity

Bernis extends Amara's treatment of violence in the *Quatre Mille* in her *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* (1997), a *récit* for the most part under-explored by critics,⁵ which disarms the enduring rhetoric on violence and the 'peur de l'étranger' (Mucchielli 2011, 75). Born out of an atypical writing experience, Bernis encounters various forms of violence (gendered, economic, racial), systemic in postcolonial French society while shedding light on the peculiarities of collaborative writing. Born in Guadeloupe in 1920, Bernis sought to escape the harsh material conditions of life in the Caribbean and so left for Paris in 1951, only to confront poverty and racism in her new life there as a cleaner living in La Courneuve. Her *récit* is but one example of her passion for art and culture which also extends to acting and singing; indeed on the paratext of the DVD documentary which combines performance and interview, she is presented as '[f]rançaise mais noire, libre mais descendante d'esclave, Chrétienne mais marquée par une histoire de sorcellerie' (Kouyaté 2008).⁶ Following on from its initial publication in 1997, her work was subsequently reissued in 2006, perhaps to coincide with the renewed interest in the *banlieues* in the aftermath of the riots. The text presents itself at first as a traditional 'récit de vie', retracing the life of this strong, hard-working woman between the 1950s and 1980s who offered her services to wealthy individuals and companies. Filled with anecdotes, this account was adapted by Catherine Vigor, a Parisian secondary school teacher who has a long record of *écriture déléguée* for immigrants.⁷ Assisted by Vigor, Bernis's narrative is one of great significance for her personally as it links life, violence and writing together: 'Je ne veux pas mourir sans avoir raconté mes luttes, mes misères, mes batailles avec exactitude' (Bernis 1997, 15).

Physical violence plays a dominating part in Bernis's *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* (1997) which initially consisted of a 'gros cahier où elle [Bernis] avait marqué tout ce qu'elle avait envie de dire' (Vigor in Levasseur 2013). Her narrative dwells on such tropes as physical abuse and sexual violence as is specified in Vigor's preface: 'J'ai été touchée par l'honnêteté et surtout l'immense courage de Parise qui a lutté toute sa vie contre [...] la pauvreté [...] la violence conjugale [...] [les] injustices [...]' (Vigor 1997, 10). The *récit* indeed is filled with various and diverse examples of physical violence pervading the different stages of her life. Bernis writes that as a child 'les maîtres battaient beaucoup les enfants' (Bernis 1997, 58) which made her skip classes 'parce que j'avais peur d'être battue' (ibid.) thus explaining her poor education and subsequent difficulties to write. Physical violence was also present at her parents' home, where Bernis's father, a former soldier, is described as a most violent man,⁸ her husband, Mr N'Diaye, another man of war, repeats later the same behaviour: 'Il buvait des litres et des litres de vin chaque jour et me frappait souvent à coup de canne ou de tabouret. Il avait une force incroyable, et

une fois qu'il m'avait attrapée et qu'il me tenait entre ses mains, il ne me lâchait plus et me cognait à tour de bras' (ibid., 163). Bernis's son, Ali, is violent too and so the cycle of concrete masculine violence continues.⁹ This prolonged exposure to men's violent conduct shaped Bernis's identity and relationship with men, making her in turn susceptible to bouts of violence: 'les hommes - je serais prête à leur donner un coup de poignard. Je suis bonne comme du bon pain mais je suis aussi capable de me dresser comme un serpent et de devenir méchante' (ibid., 266).

Besides the many references to concrete forms of violence, this text reminds us powerfully once more that violence is not limited to 'des coups de poing ou des coups de couteaux, des agressions physiques directes' (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2014, 9) but may also comprise for example 'la pauvreté des uns et la richesse des autres' (ibid., 9) thus highlighting aspects of the socio-economic and political face of violence. This narrative thus demonstrates some of the most salient forms of violent discrimination and segregation, contradicting the image of France as a 'pays de luxe où tout le monde gagnait bien sa vie' (Bernis 1997, 123) and in the process illustrates the special status of the Antillais described by Édouard Glissant (1997, 127). One particular passage situated at the outset encapsulates the prevailing racial stigma in the 1950s and reminds us of Fanon's fixation: 'Faites entrer Mme Bernis! (...) Et qui voyaient-ils entrer une nègre [...] Je voyais leur surprise! (Bernis 1997, 13) Other excerpts suggest how difficult living conditions are for the newcomers in general and black women in particular: there was a 'vieille baraque abandonnée où je dormais' (ibid., 142) indicates Bernis. 'Je donnais presque toute ma paie', 'il ne me restait rien' (ibid., 132). If many migrants with menial occupations, like Bernis, were forced to stay in temporary accommodation, the *femme de ménage*'s move to her La Courneuve five-bedroom flat in the 1960s illustrates the social mobility and access to improved living conditions. It is quite remarkable how La Courneuve represented a safe haven for her and her children, and the following lines surely exemplify a certain social promotion for Bernis, this in contrast with *banlieues* representations of the time:

J'étais bien logée à La Courneuve. J'avais joliment installé mon intérieur où rien ne manquait... Je faisais tout ce que je pouvais pour mes enfants. Je leur avais acheté une télévision noir et blanc et je me rappelle que je ne savais pas comment ça marchait (ibid., 178)

This chronicle of the everyday life and forms of violence that afflicted the poorly educated Bernis is reminiscent of François Ega's *Lettres à une noire* (1972), a text recounting Ega's personal experiences as a cleaner in the city of Marseille which has already received some academic attention (Rosello 1996, 53-80). Bernis's account, and her whole writing project, echoes the same themes while proving significantly different from Ega's. What distinguishes this *récit à plusieurs mains* stems from the cleaner's bypassing of conventional channels to tell 'une histoire dans des mots qui soient beaux, des mots qui plaisent aux gens, des mots qui aient une belle musique' (Bernis 1997, 15).

The prologue explains in detail how the *récit* , which emerged from the collaboration between Vigor and 'mon amie [Thérèse] Parise [Bernis] qui ne sait pas écrire', was made possible through long recorded discussions between the pair. The attention paid to the relationship between the cleaner and writing develops into a more complex narrative than a mere sociological account of the life of a *femme de ménage*. It also highlights the perseverance of the *femme de ménage*, beginning with Bernis's

inhibitions in using the French language, 'je parle votre langue, mais souvent j'ai l'impression que je ne suis pas française comme vous (...) car je n'arrive pas à dire les choses aussi bien que je voudrais' (ibid., 14), to her coming to song writing, 'Au début je chantais des airs connus mais petit à petit, j'ai eu envie d'écrire mes propres chansons et, j'ai retrouvé l'écriture au même moment' (ibid., 224), to the influential role of her neighbour Yvonne, 'ces pages et ces pages que je voulais transformer en chansons [...] j'ai encore dû demander à Yvonne de m'aider à les relire' (ibid., 225), to the insertion of several self-authored songs, some of which deal explicitly with economic exploitation encountered by women cleaners,¹⁰ which leaves little time for reflection and therefore hinders creativity:

Avant je ne pouvais pas savoir si j'étais intelligente ou non. J'étais toujours en train de travailler jour et nuit et je n'avais ni le temps de penser ni de réfléchir à ma propre vie. Mais le jour où je suis passée à la retraite, je me suis aperçue que si j'avais été instruite, j'aurais pu faire un tas de choses, par exemple, bien parler et écrire de belles paroles que j'aurais chantées (ibid., 226)

In addition to charting her lived experience, Bernis's account offers reflective commentary on her coming to writing and in the process shows the contribution of the other parties involved, her friend Yvonne of the 'Foyer évangélique de Grenelle [qui] m'a aidée à écrire tout ce que je voulais dire' (ibid., 225); Vigor who helped her '[à] réunir les carrés du patchwork de sa vie déchirée pour en faire un tissu, bariolé certes, mais à la trame solide' (ibid., 8). Whereas the text deals at length with the exploitation and 'la violence des hommes' (ibid., 163), the help, friendship and contribution of Bernis's female friends represents La Courneuve as another *lieu d'écriture* and provides an illuminating insight into the discovery of writing by a poor immigrant woman freed from her inhibitions. As Maryse Condé (2010) observes, '[é]crire, c'est difficile'. Thus the reflection of the now canonical writer Condé can be seen to be echoed in the statement by the socially obscure figure of Bernis:

Aujourd'hui, quand je n'ai rien à faire, j'écris de petites choses, des morceaux de chansons, même si c'est du gribouillage. Je gaspille beaucoup de pages avant d'être satisfaite et je n'ai pas le temps de m'ennuyer au contraire. C'est comme un aimant qui m'attire en avant et me pousse à écrire. Les gens qui écrivent sont comme moi, non? (1997, 231)

All in all, the writing process of *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* is a painful one for Bernis. However, even if some may consider this text a *cas limite* of *banlieues* writing, it nevertheless shows how the least formally qualified writers can negotiate and expose the multiple forms of violence at the hands of men together with the hardships of exile, poverty and racism. At the same time, this *venue à l'écriture*,¹¹ as difficult as it may be for its author, reveals how marginal narratives like Bernis's can provide a woman's perspective and offer an alternative take on the dominant discourses of *banlieues* and violence.

'Le Drame était prévu': Socio-Economic Exclusion and 'Apartheid'

The trajectory of the residents from the *banlieues* takes a dramatic turn in Maurice Bernard's 'Le Drame était prévu' (2006). Bernard's twenty-three page dark short story, which deals with the murder of a young resident (Belkacem) by his father, Ali the *harki*, deconstructs dominant representations of *banlieues* violence which oscillate

between revolt and terrorism (Rigouste 2004, 1) by providing an illuminating insight into the feeling of despair and abandonment felt by young adults in La Courneuve. In 'Le Drame était prévu', Bernard relates his own *parcours* in the Quatre Mille where he lived with his wife, Isabelle, from 1963 until his death in 2009. The autobiographically inspired protagonist, Bertrand, faces the same type of challenges encountered by Bernard. 'Le Drame était prévu' examines various forms of violence (physical, social, economic and political) and how they have impacted upon La Courneuve and its inhabitants.

The typed manuscript of this short story was sent to me by post in 2008 following a series of regular meetings and phone calls with the author during which Bernard lamented the perceived decline of the Quatre Mille. Accompanying the text was a brief note which referred to the text as 'une petite histoire vraie à peine romancée que j'ai écrite sans prétention' (Bernard 2008). Written at the time of the 2005 unrest, 'Le Drame était prévu' is Bernard's one and only literary piece and would in fact remain unpublished. The short story, which may have been circulated in the author's entourage as is sometimes the case among 'amateur' writers (Donnat 1996, 4), comprises two parts: it opens with a six-page prologue which introduces the main characters followed by the seventeen-page long drama. Whereas Amara was inspired by the impetus given by Bon and Portugal, and Bernis relied upon the cooperation of Vigor and Yvonne, Bernard's narrative is a self-authored piece, written without any input from third parties, suggesting that the author was a more experienced and well-read writer: 'Même, j'ai dévoré des tas de bouquins. J'ai lu toute la comtesse de Ségur, Victor Hugo, Balzac, Stendhal' (in Vincenot 2001, 249). Evidently immersed in writing culture, disillusioned former communist Bernard drew upon his local trade union activism as a leader of the *grève des loyers* in the late 1970s (Bernard 2006, 20), his journalistic experience for the *Journal du Canton d'Aubervilliers*, and his afterword to Jacques Nikonoff's *Chômage: nous accusons!* (1998) which Bernard co-authored with Eric Hamraoui. His outlook on the Cité is therefore distinct from the other contributors as it is heavily influenced by the decline of the *cités rouges* and their social mode of organisation.

Physical violence in 'Le Drame était prévu' underpins Bernard's narrative, set in the *cité* of the '3000' (2006, 1) as he calls it in a nod to the '4000'. In the prologue, Bernard warns the reader of the grim realities that (s)he will encounter: 'Celles, ceux qui liront cette histoire la trouveront bien noire et triste la vie aux dits 3000' (ibid., 1). The narrative begins with a dramatic episode whereby a dog is accidentally run over; this death functions as a harbinger of Belkacem's death, and also takes the reader back to the atrocities of the Algerian War:

Parmi la foule rassemblée, Ali le harki regardait la scène en maugréant selon son habitude. La vue du sang répandu par le chien devait lui rappeler d'autres flaques de sang, là-bas, en Algérie, la guerre (ibid., 6)

The short story seeks to subvert first and foremost stereotypical representations of the *banlieues* and disrupts traditional narratives on violence. Bernard's commentary takes up conventional media representations alluding to 'le béton pourri' (ibid., 13), 'les fissures des façades' (ibid., 9), the subsequent 'fermetures d'usines' (ibid., 13) and

‘chômage’ (ibid., 10) together with the increasing racism and symbolic violence of political discourse on the ‘racaille’ (ibid., 20), yet his detailed evocations of the violence that residents inflict on themselves in response to the hardships and obstacles with which they are confronted are quite telling. Bernard’s descriptions illustrate how the ‘condition de violence’ resulting from social and urban abandonment (see Wacquant 2006, 29-30) leads to anger and frustration, and triggers urban unrest. The lengthy excerpt below not only anticipates the death of Belkacem who decides to put an end to his life of marginality, but is also reminiscent of the unknown quantity of young adults in La Courneuve whose lives have been sacrificed in the name of neo-liberal economic policies and what Balibar considers as the new form of ‘apartheid qui «met à part» les populations d’origine immigrée’ (2006, 53):

Les effets de la construction bâclée des années soixante étaient plus sensibles qu’ailleurs... Les jeunes inactifs se vengeaient de leur vie difficile en cassant vitres, portes d’entrée, des boîtes aux lettres... Une série de drames avait marqué la période du meurtre commis par Verger. Un jeune noir d’origine antillaise s’était jeté de la fenêtre, il ne supportait pas le chômage et les reproches de ses parents. Ce suicide en avait appelé d’autres, un autre jeune, sans travail lui aussi, lassé des disputes incessantes des parents. Un jeune sourd muet, après s’être promené plusieurs fois sur le toit des quinze étages de la barre s’était lui aussi précipité en bas, alors que les pompiers, pour la énième fois, montaient le chercher (Bernard 2006, 10)

Self-violence as a consequence of symbolic oppression appears as a singular feature of the ‘3000’, a feature which makes Belkacem an archetype of those ‘[qui ont] été assassinés par ceux qui organisent le chômage’ (4). However, Bernard’s incisive prose and his quest for the real are not limited to a pessimistic portrayal of intolerable situations, gloomy details or sad destinies. As Bernard writes: ‘on pourrait écrire d’autres histoires, d’autres faits pleins de gaieté, drôlerie, tendresse et de solidarité’ (2006, 1). In this way, certain excerpts highlight the dignity and the honesty of the working class living in the *banlieues* which compensate for the rise of a *sentiment d’insécurité* (Lagrange 1995) such as ‘la chaleur humaine’ (Bernard 2006, 3), ‘le salut camarade’ (ibid., 12), ‘la veste de cuir’ (ibid., 7), ‘le café’ (ibid., 9), ‘la mob’ (ibid., 7), ‘les cocos [qui] discutaient’ (ibid., 9), ‘les réunions’ (ibid.), ‘les luttes’ (ibid., 2). Bernard’s vision appears as a rather nostalgic characterisation of the working-class but is nevertheless one which acknowledges the presence of racism, nationalism, repression and stigmatisation: ‘Tu te rends compte, les forts en gueule ont affiché des slogans lepénistes aux vestiaires et jouent aux fléchettes sur la photo d’un Maghrébin tué au cours d’une bavure’ (ibid., 15).

According to Jérôme Bruner (2002, 64), ‘[t]elling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are [...]’, and this is certainly true for Bernard who assumes control of his existence at various intervals by writing: not only through this story but also by means of a letter to President Mitterrand in 1983. This episode, which was prompted by the murder of Toufik in the Quatre Mille,¹² resurfaces in ‘Le drame était prévu’ when the character of Bertrand takes up his pen to denounce the murder of the young boy renamed here ‘Karim’ (Bernard 2006, 8). Bernard’s activism is then transferred to a transnational stage through his involvement in the *altermondialisation* social movement ATTAC France ‘qui a pour président (...) Jacques

Nikonoff, un ancien des dits 3000' (ibid., 2). This *engagement* coupled with his writing helps him reassert his agency and position the Quatre Mille as an unexpected site of resistance to neo-liberal economic violence. Bernard's writing thus represents a singular and detailed picture of La Courneuve and displays a man's commitment to recount the effects of society's violence on the *banlieues*:

Ceux, celles qui sont restés (es) ou les nouveaux arrivés (es) ont trop à faire pour résister aux difficultés de leurs vies. Et ils, elles le font avec courage. Une résistance qui les accapare et ne leur laisse pas le temps pour participer à des organisations de lutte sociale. Leur vie est une lutte sociale! (ibid., 4-5)

Conclusion:

The commercial success in recent years of popular *banlieue* literature such as Chimo's *Lila dit ça* (1996) or Thierry Jonquet's *La Vie de ma mère!* (2001) replete with familiar stereotypes, playing with dramatising effects, has undoubtedly contributed to the consolidation of dominant standpoints on the *banlieues*. Mainstream accounts invariably link these spaces to violence, danger, difference and a complete rejection of law and order. However, alternative characterisations of violence in literary texts have also opposed and resisted mainstream discourses. They have succeeded in uncovering multiple modes of violence, both physical and symbolic, which are 'co-present' to take up Wieviorka's analysis (1999, 8-9), and in the process, combine to reinforce societal divisions (Bourdieu 2000).

My analysis of the 'auteurs en marge' enables us to discover *banlieues* literary productions from hitherto little-known writers who do not benefit from the exposure and academic scrutiny accorded to those involved in the Qui fait la France? collective. As we have seen, the works of Amara, Bernis and Bernard allow us to view violence through an array of lenses including class, gender and race, emphasising other significant aspects of violence in postindustrial and postcolonial France ranging from neoliberal competition (Lordon 2002) to disposable workforces (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2014) to rhetorics of security and forms of 'apartheid' (Balibar 2007). Through a different approach to violence in a number of guises, their writing practices answer a therapeutic need and defy preconceived perceptions of the *banlieues* as a site of *oralité* (Mori 2012). Furthermore, they also reflect the multiplicity of ways in which writing is undertaken in the space of the *banlieues*: 'creative workshop writing', 'collaborative writing' and 'self-authored writing'. Beyond the literary canon, these methods call into question how literature is produced and approached in the context of today's *banlieues*.

In conclusion, these *banlieues* texts focussing on lived experience have proved they are not an ephemeral movement. Such texts bridge a gap in the study of the *banlieues* and prepare the ground for a new generation of writers in La Courneuve¹³ which similarly remain to be examined. Literary production is today more than ever subject to economic and political conditions which tend to further exacerbate the situation of such writers, factors which are clearly another form of symbolic violence. I propose

that the less known contributions of these ‘auteurs en marge’ represent telling tales of violence that should not be overlooked because to do so would only perpetuate the cycle of violence concerning those who live and write in the *banlieues*, consigning them indefinitely to obscurity and indifference.

¹ The work of Christina Horvath (2015) represents a significant exception with her study of *écriture collective* by young marginalised residents from the Parisian *banlieues* (Villiers-sur-Marne and Nanterre) in *Les Gars de Villiers* (2009), *Nous ... la cité. On est partis de rien et on a fait un livre* (2012) and *Paroles libres de ... jeunes de banlieues* (2011).

² In 2007, ten politically committed writers, including Mohamed Razane, Kamel Amellal and Thomté Ryam, published a series of short stories about the deterioration of *banlieue* life, preceded by a manifesto showing their full support for ‘les banlieues, les enfants d’immigrés, les invisibles, les précaires [...]’ (2007, 12).

³ In a similar vein, Mireille Rosello (1998) has expanded the study of stereotypes in relation to the *banlieues*, including young people and crime, and analyses how writers and artists have endeavoured to ‘decline’ these negative portrayals through literature and film.

⁴ Mori (2012) observes that ‘ce dispositif connaît un tournant important en 2005. Fin novembre et début décembre 2005, juste après les émeutes, le conseil général de Seine-Saint-Denis organise, suite à cet événement, plusieurs rencontres avec les agents administratifs du département et les acteurs des secteurs publics et associatifs travaillant en lien direct avec la jeunesse dans le département [...] Le fait que des jeunes aient brûlé des écoles et des bibliothèques – lieux par excellence du savoir livresque et scriptural – amène notamment à s’interroger sur la relation entre la violence exprimée par les actes et la nécessité de développer et de valoriser les activités d’écriture’.

⁵ There has been little in the way of critical attention accorded to Bernis’s work, see Silvestre (2008) and Sawadogo (2013).

⁶ See Dani Kouyaté’s documentary *Souvenirs encombrants d’une femme de ménage* (2008) and Bernis’s *Les chants de Parise* (2012) adapted by Christian Poloczek.

⁷ In the 1990s, Vigor acted as a ‘scripteur’ for immigrants eager to commit their lives to paper and wrote two ‘récits’ prior to Bernis’s: *Hawa, l’Afrique à Paris* (1991) and *Atanasio, paroles du Guatemala* (1993).

⁸ ‘Mon père trouvait toujours une raison de me battre [...] Je n’ai jamais été bien considérée par mon père, j’ai toujours été bousculée, humiliée, battue... [...] Il me donnait des claques, des coups de fouet, des coups de ceinturon de cuir qu’il avait ramené de la guerre [...] Il aurait pu me tuer plusieurs fois... pour rien du tout’ (Bernis 1997, 90-91).

⁹ ‘Ali est un démon comme son père qui lui a donné en héritage sa violence [...] Une

année, j’ai emmené Ali en Guadeloupe et il a failli me battre alors que je voulais seulement l’aider’ (Bernis 1997, 257).

¹⁰ ‘Cinq pour cent, dix pour cent, vingt pour cent,
Ça n’a pas d’importance,
Combien d’argent ça fait,
Qu’importe?
J’en ai seulement besoin pour mon loyer,
Pour m’amuser,
Et pour mes petits enfants etc.’ (Bernis 1997, 229).

¹¹ For more on the sense of frustration and anger that accompanies women’s ‘entry into writing’, see Hélène Cixous and al. (1977).

¹² The much reported ‘affaire Toufik’ goes back to July 1983 and the murder of Toufik Ouannès, a nine-year old from the Cité who was shot by a neighbour a matter of days before Bastille Day. For a full account of this *fait divers* and its consequences, see Ben Jelloun (1989), 16, 22, 46.

¹³ See, for instance, Khaled Teffaf (2009), Ibrahim Yacoub (2008), Chayma Drira (2010) and Nawel Takhlouft (2010).

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